



**Fear of antique furniture (Billy Bob Thornton's personal nightmare) appears a little farther down the wacky scale**

# Basic Instincts



**MENNA VAN PRAAG** finds the function behind the fear

Phobias are, by definition, irrational fears, though it would seem that some are more irrational than others. A fear of heights on the top of a skyscraper could certainly be deemed rational. A fear of spiders, especially in the outback of Australia, doesn't seem too crazy. Triskaidekaphobia, fear of the number thirteen, or fear of antique furniture (Billy Bob Thornton's personal nightmare), would appear to be a little farther down the wacky scale. I used to be terrified of sharks. At the time though this seemed perfectly rational to me, evil little killing machines that they are, the mockery of my family told a different story. They weren't much better though. My mum couldn't go within ten feet of a caterpillar and my dad wouldn't accompany me on a big wheel when I was a kid. My brother wasn't scared of

a thing. As I grew up and began to delve into myself a little more, I learnt the truth behind fears – from phobias to totally rational terrors. Phobias are, of course, a fear of life manifested as a fear of death – Woody Allen told me this himself. But seriously, phobias keep you limited, they keep you from taking risks. The fear of death keeps you from feeling fully alive. If you overcome these fears, you feel levels of excitement in areas you haven't touched before. Overcoming my fear of sharks certainly made taking baths a lot more fun. All phobias are the same, they all come from the same fear, and the way they manifest just demonstrates the level of that fear. So a phobia that isn't very restricting, like Triskaidekaphobia, doesn't affect a person's life significantly, there isn't much they won't do.

Agoraphobia, on the other hand, speaks of a much deeper level of fear, since it thoroughly stops the sufferer from participating in life. In a sense all fear could be defined as irrational. Rationality is measured by the degree of correlation between the internal and external state. So a fear of sharks that stops you taking a dip in the local swimming pool seems significantly more irrational than the same fear that makes you think twice before testing the waters in Brisbane. But the fear is the same, only the external circumstances have changed. If you were to walk through a field and see a snake, you'd probably feel a little scared: your pulse would quicken, you'd remain still, you might worry about extricating yourself from the situation. Then, on second glance, you realize it was a rope. Suddenly everything changes, you'd

step over it and keep walking. It is only ever your internal thoughts that define your fears. If you never learnt to be scared of anything you wouldn't be. Of course it's quite right, people tell you, to be a little scared of some things – it's called being sensible. But you can still be sensible while realising that fear – all fear – stems from your own thoughts about life rather than life itself. Life is straightforward. It will tell you that if you jump into the lion's den you're likely to get mauled to death. So if you don't want to die, don't do it. That doesn't mean you need to be scared of the lions. And since we encounter lions in life about as often as we encounter sharks, you might find that fears in general are pretty pointless. And, if you challenge your fearful thoughts about life, you'll find you've got nothing to fear.

